

Remarks of Scott A. Ferguson
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Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee & Education Committee
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Good afternoon, members of the Program Review & Investigations Committee and Education Committee. My name is Scott Ferguson and I am a music teacher at Hamden Middle School. I am here today to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program.

The goals of the BEST practices are noble and necessary in today's day and age. School districts and teachers should be held accountable for their successes and failures. New teachers need to be guided into the profession to ensure the highest levels of success. However, as with a great many programs and policies, this one is better in theory than in current practice and desperately needs revision.

In my opinion, which is based upon the experiences I had doing my portfolio as well as the experiences of fellow friends and colleagues, the very idea of assessing a teacher based solely upon a set of paper documents and 20 minute video segments is ludicrous. No one here would choose a college based merely upon the brochure you receive in the mail. And we all know the difference between a book smart person and someone with common sense. Teachers are no different. You could have a teacher who knows how to write a lesson plan, the proper technique for creating that plan and all the content knowledge in the world; but if he doesn't relate to his students, all of that will be for naught and this teacher would not be deemed very successful in the real world. However, chances are he'll do very well on his BEST Portfolio.

Prior to submission of portfolios a mentoring teacher (assuming there is one) as well as the principal of the school will sign off on the document. When I did mine, my subject area supervisor also proofed the portfolio before I submitted it to the state. My question

is this: How can three people aligned with the BEST Process proofread a portfolio, sign off on it with approval only to have it returned months later with a failing mark?

In actuality, I received a score of “3” on my portfolio. That and \$4.25 will buy me a coffee at Starbucks. One of my fellow colleagues was not so fortunate. She suffered through the above situation not once, but two times, twice receiving a score of “1” with little explanation as to why. It was not until her third try that she passed the BEST Portfolio. There are major problems with this situation.

1. She worked closely with her grade-level BEST Mentor during each of her first two attempts. In both cases, her portfolio was returned with a score of 1 and commentary specific to “format” problems. In short, the portfolio wasn’t submitted with the proper formatting.
2. She was not failed for being an insufficient or inept teacher but simply for not being in line with the required structure. As previously stated, this happened twice...and with the guidance of a “BEST Mentor Teacher.”
3. Her Mentor Teacher was a third grade teacher. She was a second grade teacher.

That same year, that very same BEST Mentor worked with two other teachers, for a total of 3 teachers under her guidance. At the same time the P.E. teacher and I did our portfolios without her guidance. I was given a music mentor from another building. I met with this individual one time at the beginning of the school year; I never heard from her again. I went on my own to other friends of mine who were music teachers for advice as well as teachers within my school whom I respected. My friend, the P.E. teacher, was also given a mentor from another school. The two of them happened to be friends and the two worked on his portfolio throughout the process. He and I both received a “3” on our portfolios. Being “specials” teachers we had to go outside of our school to find the help we needed as were we each the only teacher of our field in the school. Of the three teachers who worked with the MT in our school, two failed and one received a “2.” Noteworthy of the teacher who received a “2;” he went to a family member who was a BEST Mentor and Scorer in his own subject area (Special Ed.) days

before his portfolio was due. This family member helped him make drastic changes to his portfolio.

The goal of BEST *was* and should once again be to help beginning teachers compensate for any inadequacies in their college prep programs, getting acquainted with the policies of the school district and the profession as a whole, and getting started on the right track from day one of a teaching career. As it stands now, the BEST portfolio is a stressful task used merely as a form of teacher assessment. The portfolios are returned with very little explanation of the score, there is no professional difference between getting a two, three or four, and there is no follow up after the portfolio is submitted.

In essence, the portfolio has become a cop-out. Instead of putting forth the money necessary to implement BEST in its proper manner, it's become a process in which a teacher must prove he/she can use buzzwords in a lesson plan and on a video for twenty-minute segments. I would be disheartened to think all the work and effort I have put into my career, my passion, can be so easily defined and graded.

It is my belief that teacher assessment should be done on a local level using state mandated guidelines. Assessment should be done via administrators and fellow colleagues. People who know the school situation, demographics, challenges, opportunities, technological capabilities and staff support should be the ones who decide whether or not a teacher is successful. There is no reason why a teacher who is observed, graded and deemed successful by mentors and school level administration should be considered a failure by a faceless, nameless group of people with little accountability themselves.

The suggestions and solutions presented by the PRC in Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 will go a long way to fixing a very broken process that started with very amiable goals and got off course along the way.

Mentor teachers with appropriate training and time to devote to newer teachers will help ease the burden that is the very essence of the first year of teaching. Having someone who has been down the path you're currently trying to maneuver is the most helpful assistance that can be offered. Having a mentor in my building would have greatly eased my burden while doing my portfolio. Having follow-up after I received my score would have helped me to become a more effective teacher in a quicker manner.

Everyone is well aware in this time of possible recession and constant cutbacks that cost efficiency is a priority. I submit to you that it is far more cost effective to hire, develop and maintain quality teachers as opposed to hiring new people year after year with the same problems, shortcomings and deficiencies. With this current situation that offers very little to no help to newer teachers, students' scores remain lower than is acceptable, schools continue not to meet Adequate Yearly Progress goals set forth by NCLB and younger, newer teachers are leaving the profession. The current situation reeks of Albert Einstein's famous quote:

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results"

Our state, our teachers and our children deserve better.